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# USSR Weekly Review

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USSR WEEKLY REVIEW

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This publication is prepared by the USSR Division, Office of Regional and Political Analysis, with occasional contributions from other offices within the National Foreign Assessment Center. The views presented are the personal judgments of analysts on significant events or trends in Soviet foreign and domestic affairs. Although the analysis centers on political matters, it discusses politically relevant economic or strategic trends when appropriate. Differences of opinion are sometimes aired to present consumers with a range of analytical views. Comments and queries are welcome. They should be directed to the authors of the individual articles or to

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Some Thoughts on the Brezhnev Succession

There can be little question that Brezhnev has firm control over the central institutions wielding power in the Soviet leadership. Changes in the Politburo and the Secretariat since 1964 reveal the slow but steady growth of his influence in these bodies. The tempo has quickened since the 25th Party Congress in 1976, with the purge of Polyansky and Podgorny and the promotion of Chernenko--a key figure in Brezhnev's management of the Politburo's affairs. For some time now, the Politburo has usually been conjoined with Brezhnev in speeches and articles, and infrequently mentioned by itself.

Granted that Brezhnev's position is relatively stable, nevertheless certain developments could endanger it. The declining growth rate of the economy leaves a reduced margin for Brezhnev to cope with unfavorable developments, such as the recent disappointing harvest and the emerging shortages of important industrial materials, including steel and oil. Major setbacks in foreign policy, where Brezhnev's performance in office has been mixed, could cause him problems. More generally, sharp declines in the fortunes of Brezhnev's policies, particularly if they were to come at times of impaired health when the energy available to Brezhnev for political activities is reduced, could weaken the leadership's stability.

The legitimacy of personal authority in the Soviet system has come into question in the past two decades owing to Khrushchev's attack on Stalin and to the fact that Khrushchev himself later became an unperson.

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In order to strengthen his personal authority and create defenses against potential opponents, Brezhnev probably has a need to foster a cult of his person. In fact, such a cult seems to be a functional requirement of the supreme leader in almost every Communist state--whether he is modest or vain. As Khrushchev discovered, however, such a cult gives no assurance of continued tenure in office; while a useful adjunct to power based on the party machine, it is not nearly as efficacious as the use of terror against the leader's rivals. Moreover, Brezhnev's encouragement of the cult, by threatening to destabilize the leadership balance, could provoke strengthened resistance to the growth of his authority. Unlike Khrushchev's strong political machine based on a far-reaching system of patronage, Brezhnev's is based on the attenuated allegiance of numerous officials whose tenure in office he did not disturb and whose entry into the Central Committee Brezhnev facilitated by increasing its membership by almost two-thirds. As a result, Brezhnev's is not a very sturdy machine and needs buttressing from the cult of his personality. Brezhnev's power is largely based on the party apparatus and on shrewd use of its supreme office, but that power lacks statutory authority and is weakly institutionalized. For this reason, it is likely that the general secretary's power will be substantially degraded in the course of its transfer to the incumbent, thereby upsetting the balance within the leadership. Whether the Brezhnev succession leads to a crisis of the leadership simply (like a cabinet crisis in a parliamentary democracy) or to a crisis of institutions will depend in good part on the adequacy of the preparations for the succession and the gravity of the domestic and international problems that the new leadership will have to address. There is good reason on both counts to question whether the Brezhnev administration has created the necessary conditions for a smooth transition.

By choosing an heir, grooming him for rule, and concentrating enough power in his hands to facilitate his succession, Brezhnev could contribute significantly to an orderly succession. This conceivably could prevent the substantial reduction in the general secretary's power that has previously attended its transfer, not only in the USSR but in all Communist states. Yet Brezhnev has not directed his efforts to arranging the succession; his present concern is to preserve and

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enhance his own power. Rather than actively grooming an heir, Brezhnev has taken care to prevent any young and promising figure from emerging who might be viewed as a suitable candidate to replace him. Consequently, the probable heir to Brezhnev's office if it were vacated in the near future is Brezhnev's elder, Kirilenko, although even this septuagenarian has been denied the broad exposure in diplomacy and defense affairs (particularly in relations with the US and SALT) that might facilitate his rule.

Brezhnev's failure so far to prepare the succession or to address seriously the regime's basic social and political problems (such as the reduced growth rate of the economy, the slackening of discipline in the work force and in the regime's key institutions, the worsening ethnodemographic situation, and the need to rejuvenate the leadership) will make it difficult for the next general secretary to consolidate his position and to govern effectively. He, like Brezhnev and Khrushchev, no doubt will find it convenient to blame his predecessor for the country's intractable problems. For this reason, among others, it is doubtful that Brezhnev has assured his place in Soviet history any more than Khrushchev did. "His" Constitution will probably earn him no more lasting praise than Khrushchev won by "his" party program.

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Do the Soviets Believe They Have a Polish Problem?

The Majority View

The proliferation of economic and political problems afflicting the Gierek regime in Warsaw have convinced many Western observers that Poland is teetering on the brink of a full-fledged crisis. A recent CIA analysis concluded that Polish stability is "more seriously threatened today than at any time since 1956." A State Department analysis spoke of "a much greater potential" for fundamental upheaval than existed in 1956 or 1970. The US Embassy in Warsaw has warned that Poland is faced with the "danger of an explosion."

The somber assessments of these Western observers appear to be shared by many Poles. Dissident sources speak contemptuously of the "weakness" of the regime, and describe a situation in which many of the traditional reins of control have already slipped from the grasp of the government. The regime itself has shown signs of serious alarm over its situation. It has engaged in frenetic efforts to manipulate the supply and distribution of scarce foodstuffs to defuse popular discontent and has made strenuous attempts to win the support of the Catholic Church. Even the Church--in the person of Cardinal Wyszynski--has publicly pledged to use its moral authority to calm passions which could otherwise damage the nation, a gesture indicative of the gravity with which it views the present situation.

The Soviet Assessment

The consensus is not complete. Some foreign observers see Poland's present problems as serious, but no worse than those that have plagued it in the past, and do not regard the present situation as unusually tense. Curiously, the Soviets, who have repeatedly demonstrated their general sensitivity to the threat of unrest in Eastern Europe, appear to be among those who regard the situation in Poland with relative equanimity.

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Our evidence is admittedly scanty, but remarkably consistent. [redacted] the Soviets have been unresponsive to Polish request for aid, and have indicated that what the Poles need more than aid are more vigorous efforts to put their political house in order.

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[redacted] for example, that Soviet officials were playing down Polish concern about the risk of civil unrest in Poland. They reportedly were pushing the Poles to take a tougher line toward dissident intellectuals and the Church, and to tighten the reins over the large private sector of the Polish economy.

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[redacted] a Soviet Embassy official last summer warned a Polish audience that an expansion of Soviet aid was dependent on the Polish Government's willingness to correct its "liberal tendencies." The Soviet specifically criticized the Polish Government's attitude toward dissidents, the workers' movements, and the Church.

Moscow's present inaction suggests that the professed complacency of Soviet officials is genuine. In the past, the Soviets have proven themselves willing to extend large amounts of aid to stave off trouble in Eastern Europe, as in the aftermath of the Polish riots in June 1976.

The most recent trade figures confirm, however, that there has been no significant increase in Soviet deliveries in 1977. Their niggardliness now suggests that they do not see any compelling need to act. Moreover, their reported persistence in urging the Poles to take actions that the latter regard as highly dangerous suggests that they do not share the Polish assessment of the risks involved.

#### Why is Moscow Complacent?

We are left with the conclusion that the Soviet estimate of the prospects for Poland is more sanguine than that of most observers. The explanation does not

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lie in any general complacency about the stability of the situation in Eastern Europe, much less Poland. Rather than displaying complacency, Soviet attitudes toward Eastern Europe indicate a high degree of suspicion and sensitivity to the threat of "counterrevolution" or threats to Soviet control abetted from abroad. Moscow has been exaggeratedly sensitive, for example, to the ineffectual efforts of the Chinese to court the East Europeans. Similarly, Moscow's perception of the political volatility of much of Eastern Europe has been behind its vehement opposition to the slogans of democratic Communism promulgated by the Western Communists, and also behind its hostile reaction to the human rights campaign of the Carter administration. Given this pattern of general sensitivity--even hypersensitivity--to the threat of "subversion" in Eastern Europe, the question arises as to why the Soviets have been so oblivious to the specific danger signs emanating from Poland.

It is conceivable, but unlikely, that Moscow's apparent equanimity simply reflects a better understanding of the situation than our own. Moscow obviously has better access to information than does the Western observer, but the Poles presumably have a still better command of the facts than the Soviets, and they show no similar equanimity. There remain two more likely alternatives: either Soviet information is inferior to that available to other observers or Soviet judgment leaves something to be desired. Neither alternative should be discounted.

Moscow's privileged position in Poland does not necessarily ensure the Soviets a better grasp of grass-root attitudes than that available to more distant and detached observers. It is unlikely that the Soviets have any contact with the mass of dissident intellectuals and disaffected workers who are the source of Poland's political difficulties. Presumably the Soviets obtain the bulk of their political intelligence from official Polish sources. This means that the information available to the Soviets is likely to have the opposite bias from that available to foreign journalists and diplomats with dissident contacts. While the latter are likely to receive an exaggerated and overly optimistic impression of the strength and prospects of the disaffected,

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the Soviets are likely to receive an equally exaggerated impression of the regime's command of the situation. Efforts by Polish leaders to convince the Soviets of the need for aid cannot be carried too far without running the risk of losing Soviet support for their continued stay in office. Clearly the Poles have not been alarmist enough to convince Moscow that assistance is required.

The Soviet habit of relying on official sources of information has hurt them before. This reportedly was one of the reasons they so badly misjudged the situation in Czechoslovakia in late 1967 and 1968. Their official contacts were telling them that the situation, although difficult, was still in hand at a time when the tides of change had already become irresistible.

Even if Soviet diplomats and intelligence officials on the scene do not view the situation through rose-colored glasses, it is the information that reaches the decisionmakers in Moscow that is all-important. What we know [redacted] indicates that there are formidable obstacles to candid and objective reporting of bad news to Moscow.

For the Soviet Embassy in Warsaw to tell Moscow that the situation is bleak and potentially explosive would be to tell Moscow that its past and present policies have been misguided. Simple self-preservation is likely to induce the Soviet Ambassador to report some bad news--he would not want to be vulnerable to criticism that he had totally failed to alert Moscow to the dangers of the situation--but he is likely to be tempted to put the bad news in "context"--disturbing but isolated phenomena.

It should be noted that the KGB enjoys the reputation, at least, of more candid and objective reporting on local situations than Soviet diplomats. This raises the possibility that whatever the derelictions of the Soviet Embassy, the Soviet leadership is still receiving a fairly accurate picture of the negative aspects of the Polish situation.

The question then becomes one of the quality of judgment within the Soviet leadership, and the record here is not very reassuring. It must be noted that

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Moscow's previous efforts to save the situation in moments of crisis in Poland were very much ex post facto. There is no evidence that Moscow foresaw the riots that forced the Gierek regime to retract food price increases in 1976, or the riots that unseated Gomulka and brought Gierek to power in 1970. There is the additional example of Czechoslovakia, to which we have already made reference.

In addition to informational gaps, it is possible that an inherent ideological bias makes it difficult for the Soviet leaders to make an accurate assessment of the situation in Poland. The most serious problem in Poland is the alienation of the Polish working class, and in all likelihood it is extremely difficult for a Soviet leadership, which has grown gray of hair in the service of the Party, to accept the possibility that their system could be rejected by the bulk of the working class--as distinct from a few isolated "subversives" and "traitors."

Beyond that, there is the simple fact that the recognition of an unusually dangerous situation in Poland would imply a need for Soviet action. If there is anything that the aging Soviet leadership under Brezhnev has demonstrated, however, it is its aversion to difficult policy decisions. Clearly any program of economic assistance large enough to defuse the Polish situation would imply painful sacrifices for the Soviet economy and would be difficult for the Soviet leadership to undertake.

#### Implications

Moscow's apparent unwillingness or inability to recognize the dimensions of Poland's problems has potentially serious implications. By diminishing the prospects for any major infusion of Soviet aid, it raises the odds that serious problems may arise. In addition, Moscow's apparently flawed perceptions raise the danger that Polish leaders may be denied until too late the flexibility to make necessary concessions if their position begins to come undone. Finally, the apparent blindness of Soviet leaders to the dimensions of the Polish problem makes it more likely that the

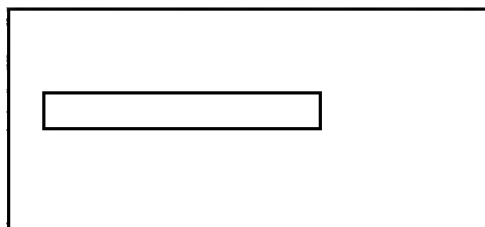
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Soviets will be ill-prepared to deal with a crisis and, hence, raises the odds of miscalculation in the event of a Polish crisis.

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### New Bonuses Aimed at Easing Railway Bottlenecks in USSR

The Ministry of Railways is advocating a new bonus scheme to ease bottlenecks in the economy caused by the hard-pressed railroad industry. The proposed scheme would reward completion of short-term or one-time targets rather than annual goals. The Ministry hopes this proposal will smooth traffic patterns and result in more efficient use of rail capacity.

A shift to short-term and one-time bonuses is intended to provide incentives for meeting delivery schedules throughout the year. Currently, bonuses are based on fulfillment of annual plans for volume of traffic, profits, and labor productivity, often contributing to delays in deliveries until the end of the year when the plan must be fulfilled. Changing the bonus structure would produce an incentive for smoother railroad operation without increasing wages and attracting more workers to that occupation.

This year Soviet railroads often have been cited in the press for their inability to move requisite raw materials and finished goods without delays and losses. The major complaints include: a shortage of freight cars, insufficient through-routing, delays in loading or unloading cars, less than optimal loading, inadequate materials-handling equipment, and pilferage and waste of goods in transit. The Soviet Deputy Minister for Foreign Trade blamed the transport system for delays and waste in transporting imports and exports and bemoaned the lack of rolling stock.

The transportation bottleneck cut a wide swath across the economy in 1977:

- Grain haulage was retarded by a freight car shortage.

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- Kuzbass coal deliveries were delayed due to the disrepair of rolling stock.
- The wood industry was unable to make deliveries to construction and other industries due to delays in car unloading, especially on weekends.
- A chemical plant's overfulfillment of targets for fertilizer output was wasted while awaiting rolling stock.
- Delivery plans were underfulfilled for iron and manganese ore, chemicals, and mineral fertilizer and other raw materials.
- A shortage of tank cars delayed delivery of some petroleum and gas products.
- The lack of gondola cars hampered coal shipments.
- A backlog of finished materials, fuels, and raw materials has accumulated pending eventual delivery.
- A shortage of special cars for transporting motor vehicles, tractors, large and heavy equipment, alumina, sugar, soda, and cement has delayed delivery, or, in some cases, forced delivery in a manner causing extensive waste.

During the last few years the railway machinery industry has encountered difficulties in meeting planned output of freight cars. In fact, output this year has even lagged behind last year's pace, possibly due to stagnation in steel output. Moreover, some plants produce railway machinery jointly with military machinery and priorities do not favor rolling stock. Since efforts to boost production have been unsuccessful, the Ministry of Railways recognizes that it must use more intensively the equipment already available to it and decrease peak load periods by smoothing out traffic over time.

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